

7/31/23 Monday

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US Public Confidence in Military Declined Over Past Five Years to 26-Year Low - Poll

According to a new report published by Gallup, public confidence in the abilities of the US military is at its lowest point in more than two decades, and the decline has accelerated over the last five years.

The poll, [conducted between](#) June 1 and June 22, found that just 60% of Americans are likely to express “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the US military. That number hasn’t been that low since 1997 and hasn’t been lower since 1988, the analytics company noted. It’s also not far above the low confidence seen during the Vietnam War era, when between 50% and 58% of Americans expressed high confidence in the armed forces.

What’s more, much of that decline has happened in the last five years. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, public confidence spiked and held above 70% for nearly two decades, declining to 69% in 2021 and reaching 60% two years later.

It’s hard to say exactly why the decline occurred, but Gallup noted a precipitous drop following the [US withdrawal from Afghanistan](#) in August 2021.

The 20-year-long war and reconstruction effort was supposed to create a democratic state capable of defeating the Taliban* insurgency and possibly even reintegrating former Taliban fighters into a new, more liberal Afghan society.

Instead, when the Islamist group launched a new offensive in the months prior to the US departure, the US-backed government crumbled so quickly the Taliban recaptured Kabul even before US forces had left. It left the two rival militaries in an awkward position as they attempted to run security for tens of thousands of would-be refugees, many of whom were collaborators, as a Daesh-aligned** group opposed to both US and Taliban rule staged attacks against them and vulnerable civilians.

The spectacle of US forces fleeing Kabul airport with thousands of refugees in tow as their erstwhile enemies solidified their control outside the airport gates was seen by many as summarizing the 20-year-long war as a failure.

According to the poll, both Democrats and Republicans are more likely to express high confidence in the military, but not by much: 68% of GOP voters and 62% of Democratic voters responded as such. Political independents - a kitchen sink category of nonalignment with the two major parties that has increased to its [largest-ever proportions](#) in recent years - were less likely than the average, with just 55% saying they’d express high confidence in the US military. Gallup also noted that the decline in confidence in the military [paralleled waning public confidence](#) in other national institutions as well, including small businesses, the police, the medical system, the US Supreme Court, banks, and labor unions. Many of those institutions registered their lowest-ever state of public confidence in the poll.

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Report: FBI Contracted Firm That Circumvented Federal Blacklist to Buy NSO Spyware

According to a report by the New York Times, a US government contractor that was revealed as having illegally and secretly used spyware made by the Israeli firm NSO Group was doing so as part of a contract with the FBI. The bureau now says it was lied to by the contractor.

Earlier this year, the Times revealed a government contractor called Riva Networks had secretly concluded a contract with NSO in November 2021, just days after the Biden administration [banned US companies](#) from buying NSO's spyware. The ban came after it was revealed that one of NSO's most popular products, Pegasus, was being abused around the globe by governments intent on spying on journalists, activists and political dissidents.

However, this product was different: the program was called Landmark and could secretly transmit a cell phone's GPS location to the program's user. The NYT report claimed the contract explicitly mentioned it being deployed in Mexico.

After the paper's report, an FBI investigation revealed it was actually the FBI that had contracted Riva Networks and the bureau canceled the contract.

The FBI has reportedly claimed Riva Networks misled the bureau. One FBI official who spoke with the outlet said the FBI thought Riva was using a geolocation tool it had developed itself, and didn't know about Landmark being an NSO product.

Riva apparently didn't care much for the Biden administration's attempts to block the use of NSO spyware by the US government and its contractors, either: not only did the company ignore NSO being put on a Commerce Department blacklist five days before concluding the contract with NSO, it kept using the Landmark tool into 2023.

The contract was signed using a fake name for the company as well as for its CEO, Robin Gamble, according to the outlet, which reported the company was referred to as "Cleopatra Holdings" and Gamble as "William Malone." It had reportedly used the same pseudonyms to buy Pegasus from the NSO Group.

In a statement, the federal law enforcement bureau revealed it had been using Landmark to track suspected fugitives in Mexico.

"As part of our mission, the FBI is tasked with locating fugitives around the world who are charged in US courts, including for violent crimes and drug trafficking," the agency said. "To accomplish this, the FBI regularly contracts with companies who can provide technological assistance to locate these fugitives who are hiding abroad."

"The FBI has not employed foreign commercial spyware in these or any other operational endeavors. This geolocation tool did not provide the FBI access to an actual device, phone or computer. We will continue to lawfully utilize authorized tools to protect Americans and bring criminals to justice," the statement continued.

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Georgia Resident Becomes Third in US Killed by 'Brain-Eating Amoeba' in 2023

A resident of the US state of Georgia has died from a rare infection caused by a protozoan known colloquially as a "brain-eating amoeba." They are the third person to die in the US this year from the microscopic creature, which might be spreading further north thanks to climate change.

The Georgia Department of Public Health [confirmed on Friday](#) that infection by the amoeba *Naegleria fowleri* was the cause of death for a resident of the Peach State whose name, age, and gender were withheld.

"A Georgia resident has died from *Naegleria fowleri* infection, a rare infection which destroys brain tissue, causing brain swelling and usually death," the agency said. "The individual was likely infected while swimming in a freshwater lake or pond in Georgia."

It is the third reported case of *Naegleria fowleri*-related death this year in the US and the sixth in Georgia since 1962. A boy in Nevada died of the same infection earlier this month after likely acquiring it during a dip in some hot springs, and [a man in Florida died](#) from the infection in March after likely acquiring it by using tap water to flush his sinuses.

"The amoeba is naturally occurring, and there is no routine environmental test for *Naegleria fowleri* in bodies of water; and because it is very common in the environment, levels of the amoebas that naturally occur cannot be controlled," health officials said. "The location and number of amoebas in the water can vary over time within the same body of water."

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), [the amoeba is](#) "thermophilic," meaning it loves hot environments, but has never been found in salt water. Its fondness for warmth means it is typically not found in the colder parts of the world, including the northern United States.

In recent years, cases have been found further north, including in Minnesota, where winters can be brutally cold. [A 2021 study](#) by the Cleveland Clinic has tracked the amoeba's steady move northward since the late 1970s, warning that the "change in where infections happen could be due to climate change."

Infection is rare and cannot happen by ingesting the amoeba or by spreading from person to person; it only happens by the amoeba coming in contact with the sinuses. If the infection takes hold, it progresses rapidly, triggering severe headache, fever, nausea and vomiting between five and 12 days of infection, which will progress to a stiff neck, seizures and coma. Death is the nearly inevitable result, with just four out of 154 confirmed cases surviving infection since 1962. Death is typically just five days after the onset of symptoms.

The cause of the rapid deterioration is the amoeba, a small single-celled organism, feasting on the victim's brain tissue - hence why *Naegleria fowleri* is commonly known as the "brain-eating amoeba."

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Biden Posturing as Strong Against Russia With 'Dangerous Cat-and-Mouse Game' in Syria

In the skies over Syria, the US-led coalition has allowed 23 dangerous close encounters to happen between US and Russian aircraft this year, according to the leadership of Russia's mission in Syria. In 11 of those incidents, coalition aircraft illuminated Russian aircraft with their radars.

While Russian aircraft have permission to operate within the borders of the Arab state by the Syrian government as part of the coalition against Daesh* and other Islamist forces seeking to control Damascus, American forces have no such permission and operate inside of [Syria's borders illegally](#).

For years, Russian and American forces, as well as those of other nations such as Turkiye, have found a way to cooperate in preventing the tense situation in Syria from spiraling into another all-out war. However, since the conflict in Ukraine began, American forces have increased their provocations, with a sharp spike coming during [Ukraine's counteroffensive](#) that began in the late Spring.

Retired US Air Force Lt. Col. Karen Kwiatkowski, a former analyst for the US Department of Defense, told Sputnik that the increased tensions in Syria are mostly the consequence of domestic US politics, where US President Joe Biden is likely posturing as strong on foreign policy in anticipation of the coming November 2024 US presidential election, even though increasing numbers of lawmakers are becoming fed up with another "endless war" in the Middle East.

"Not long ago, the US House of Representatives voted whether or not to bring all our remaining forces home from Syria," she said, noting that "1 in 4 Republicans and 1 in 4 Democrats voted for peace and against [stealing Syrian oil](#). There is a lot of domestic criticism of US forces overseas, and Syria especially, and this bipartisan support to bring troops home is growing. As a result, the president and his appointees need to show that those forces are doing something 'popular' in Syria, and having close calls with Russia may be part of that. It helps justify whatever it is our forces are doing in northern Syria and gets the public's attention off stolen Syrian oil."

"It also matches up with the belief of many on the Biden reelection team in DC that Biden needs to appear strong against Russia. It reflects the fundamental strategic naivete and outright cravenness of the Pentagon top brass, and people like [Secretary of State Antony] Blinken and [White House National Security Adviser Jake] Sullivan who shape our foreign policy," Kwiatkowski added.

"For the US government, all things 'Russia' are connected. Russia's military capability has been underestimated by US policymakers, in part because they are fed offensive and imperial strategies by people employed in the defense industry who benefit personally from decisions that are not actually in the national interest, and neoconservatives who have been completely wrong with every plan and prediction they have made, but who remain influential in Congress and in all US administrations since Reagan's time in the 1980s."

"I do think US actions in Syria are seen as a way to help support the Ukraine effort, as a Russian distraction, or a defensive effort on behalf of Syria. Many are beginning to believe that the senile US President is interested in starting World War III for personal or political reasons."

The retired officer briefly explained what it means for a fighter jet to be “illuminated” by a target radar system.

“‘Lighting up’ a target is to acquire it on radar or other targeting guidance system. Once this happens, the next step would be to directly fire upon the target (if a target radar is in a fighter jet, armed drone, or ground air defense system) or more commonly, to assist a different weapon system in the network, located on land, sea or in air, to fire on the target from further away,” she said.

“In an active war or defense scenario, illuminating a target is followed immediately by fire, and fighter and bomber aircraft and drones are equipped with sensors that warn them if they have been acquired by enemy radar, so that they may take evasive action, and/or destroy the target radar system,” she explained.

Kwiatkowski added that “one could say it is a cat-and-mouse game, and no one intends to start a US-Russia direct war over Syria.”

Still, the retired USAF colonel described the situation in Syria as “dangerous-to-very-dangerous.”

“The chances of the US military making a mistake in playing mouse-and-cat with Russian pilots over Syria, with the excuse of hunting ISIS* or anything else, are increasing. Washington, DC, politicians - Democrats and many pro-war Republicans - are frustrated as Biden declines and may face criminal charges, Vice President Harris is assessed as unsuitable to lead, and the natives are restless. Russia shooting down a US drone in Syria could be spun in Washington and [become] an incident used to give Biden and his staff a way out of their troubles. A nice hot war, even a nuclear one, also lends itself to lockdowns and martial law here at home. For many in DC, which is both bankrupt in terms of money and of strategy, this is an acceptable and even positive outcome.”

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70 Years of 'Uncertain Peace': Making of the 1953 Korean War Ceasefire

At the end of World War II, a Korean peninsula halfway liberated from Japanese colonialism became the stage for the first major showdown of the Cold War. A brutal civil war between rival communist and capitalist governments drew in world powers with a stake in the outcome, and an estimated 3 million people were killed.

On July 27, 1953, representatives from the two sides of the Korean War signed an armistice agreement in Panmunjom, a village just north of the line of control, establishing a ceasefire across the Korean Peninsula. The agreement was intended to pave the way for a permanent peace treaty that has never materialized, leaving a tense standoff in place for the 70 years since.

The day was marked on Thursday with different commemorations in the two Koreas, with the socialist government in Pyongyang remembering the war as a [victory against US imperialism](#) and casting its survival as a continued thumb in the face of Washington and the capitalist government in the South. In Seoul, the mood was more somber, but used by conservative

President Yoon Suk Yeol to play up the "threat" posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the official name for the North.

Sputnik takes a look back at the events of 1953 that gave birth to the ceasefire, ending a war that claimed 3 million lives, and the reasons that a permanent peace agreement was never arrived upon.

From Dynamic War to Stalemate

By December 1950, the United States was already searching for a way to end the conflict after facing a major reversal of fortunes and being forced to evacuate its forces from Pyongyang.

Four months earlier, the decisive United Nations amphibious assault on Incheon, a DPRK-controlled city more than 100 miles behind the front lines, had taken pressure off the besieged Republic of Korea (RoK) city of Busan, the last holdout of President Syngman Rhee. The Korean People's Army (KPA) forces had been forced to hastily withdraw northward, and the US-led United Nations forces invaded far into the North's territory.

By October, UN forces had advanced so far that China intervened in the conflict as they approached the China-DPRK border, sending hundreds of thousands of men into the conflict under North Korean command as the [People's Volunteer Army](#) (PVA). The tidal wave of troops reversed the course of the war, forcing the Americans into retreat.

After a series of stunning defeats, the US-led forces evacuated Pyongyang, the largest city in the North, and were forced back to near the 38th Parallel by mid-December, not far from either the pre-war dividing line or the post-armistice Demilitarized Zone.

The US-led UN force offered a ceasefire on December 11, 1950, but it was rejected by the Chinese government following the dramatic successes of the recent months. Two weeks later, the PVA and KPA launched the Third Phase Offensive, a daring night attack that caught UN forces by surprise and allowed the recapturing of Seoul just days later.

However, the PVA-KPA momentum quickly sputtered out between their troops being exhausted by months of fighting and a host of other logistical problems, and a UN counteroffensive recaptured Seoul in March. By July 1951, the front had stabilized into a bloody stalemate, with little territory being exchanged over the next two years.

The Slow March Toward Ceasefire

UN talk of a ceasefire resurfaced in May and June of 1951, but was strongly opposed by Rhee, who retained a [desire to reunify all of Korea](#) under his rule. DPRK leader Kim Il-Sung was no less adamant about reunifying Korea under socialist rule, but unlike Rhee, Kim assented to ceasefire talks when the UN ignored Rhee's objections and sent peace envoys to Pyongyang anyway.

Talks concerning an armistice began on July 10, 1951, in the city of Kaesong, just inside DPRK-controlled territory, but soon moved to Panmunjom following controversy over what might have been an attack on the site by UN forces. They proceeded on a set of discussion items laid out in the weeks before and which continued to guide the talks until the final agreement was signed in 1953. They included:

Establishing a military demarcation line between the two armies, which would serve as the basis for a demilitarized zone, as the most basic condition for the cessation of hostilities

Establishing a supervisory organization to carry out the terms of the truce and armistice

Arrangements for the return of prisoners-of-war held by both sides

Recommendations to the governments of all countries involved

The biggest sticking point was prisoners-of-war (POWs): while the PVA-KPA forces held some 10,000 POWs, the UN forces had captured more than 150,000 troops. Talks went very slowly, but picked up speed after India took over the repatriation commission.

Talks further accelerated following the death of Soviet leader Josef Stalin in March 1953. While the Soviet Union was not party to the talks, the fellow socialist state had given substantial military-technical and intelligence assistance to Chinese and North Korean forces, as well as sent its fighter pilots to patrol the skies over the DPRK. The new Soviet leadership wasted little time voicing its support for a quick peace agreement in Korea.

A unique aspect of the agreement reached on July 27, 1953, is that it is a ceasefire between military forces and not between governments. That is how the agreement did not automatically normalize relations between the two sides, or lead to a peace treaty.

Geneva Talks Fail

A key article of the Armistice Agreement, Article IV Paragraph 60, called on all conflict parties to attend a political conference within three months of its signing "to ensure the peaceful settlement of the Korean question." Such a conference was never called, but the topic was taken up at another summit in Geneva, Switzerland, in April 1954, nine months after the armistice was signed, to deal with a very different topic: Vietnam.

The 1954 Geneva talks featured two separate delegations: one to discuss the breakup of French Indochina, a colony in Southeast Asia in which pro-independence insurgencies had all but defeated French colonial forces and which would yield the nation-states of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; and another to address the outstanding issues in Korea.

At the Korean meeting were delegates from the US, USSR, People's Republic of China, North Korea, and South Korea. The Americans remained mostly aloof from the talks, however, and backed the South Korean proposals. Officials claimed Moscow wanted to turn Korea into a puppet state, mirroring its position on the reunification of Germany that had led to the creation of separate East and West German republics in 1949. Meanwhile, China and the Soviet Union issued declarations supporting a reunified Korea.

The Korean delegations agreed on basically nothing: the North's delegation wanted all foreign troops to leave Korea, and then to hold Korea-wide elections run by an all-Korean commission made up of equal parts North and South Korean members, and to increase economic and cultural relations between the two territories. However, the South's delegation only wanted UN-supervised elections in the North and for Chinese forces to withdraw, while the US-led UN forces remained in the country as a "police force."

The Korean part of the conference ended on June 15 with no agreements and no outcomes aside from maintenance of the current position: a DMZ separating two Korean states, patrolled by both sides, across which a military standoff has endured ever since.

The standoff became even more dangerous, however, when the US decided to unilaterally abrogate Paragraph 13d of the armistice, which said neither side would bring new weapons into Korea except when trading out similar equipment.

Ignoring the concerns of its allies, the US dispatched nuclear-tipped missiles and atomic artillery cannons in 1958, which soon included nuclear-tipped cruise missiles and even a type of landmine with a nuclear fission explosive. Pyongyang responded by asking Moscow and Beijing to help it develop nuclear weapons, but both powers declined; the DPRK eventually [tested its own nuclear device](#) in 2006.

The other half of the Geneva conference was more substantive: the UK, US, USSR, China, France, and Viet Minh agreed to separate Vietnam into two territories that would be reunited pending the results of elections scheduled for 1956.

North Vietnam, controlled by the communist Viet Minh, had soundly defeated the French in the siege of Dien Bien Phu, with the fort surrendering during the Geneva proceedings. However, the former Nguyen-dynasty emperor Bao Dai was put in power in South Vietnam, where French forces retained control, and the US looked to prevent a total communist takeover.

The 1956 elections were canceled after it was realized that a communist victory was all but assured, and the stage was set for what became the [Second Indochina War](#) - in America called the Vietnam War, and in Vietnam called the Resistance War Against the United States.

The People's Volunteer Army stayed in the DPRK until 1958, helping to oversee five years of dramatic postwar reconstruction jointly sponsored by the PRC and USSR before withdrawing. However, the US has retained a 28,500-strong garrison in South Korea ever since, which has been a major sticking point between any separate rapprochement between the two Koreas, such as was attempted in 2018-19.

2018 Panmunjom Declaration

Following years of tense standoff that included US-South Korean drills rehearsing a "decapitation strike" against DPRK leader Kim Jong Un and DPRK tests of a thermonuclear device and an intercontinental ballistic missile, the two Koreas suddenly reached toward rapprochement in early 2018 as South Korea prepared to host the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang that February. The two Koreas entered the stadium as a joint delegation under a flag portraying a reunited Korea, although their athletes competed separately afterward. By April, Kim and then-South Korean President Moon Jae-in had not only held peace talks, but signed a joint declaration at Panmunjom for peace, prosperity and unification. In the document, the two nations committed themselves to denuclearizing the Korean peninsula and to further talks aimed at bringing a formal end to the Korean War.

Further talks between Kim and Moon continued through 2018, leading to visits to each others' capital cities, an increase in cultural and economic exchanges, and the repatriation of soldiers' remains, among other friendly actions.

The Panmunjom Declaration helped pave the way for further talks between Kim and then-US President Donald Trump, first in Singapore and later in Hanoi, which ultimately fell apart. The US refused to lower its economic sanctions against the DPRK before seeing proof of irreversible and verifiable denuclearization steps, despite the North dynamiting its primary test site at Punggye-ri and shutting down the nuclear reactor at Yongbyon used to make weapons fuel. Ultimately, the US was unwilling to withdraw from South Korea and Seoul was unwilling to part with its ally, and the resumption of joint military drills after the collapse of the US-DPRK talks significantly cooled inter-Korean relations. The election of Yoon Suk Yeol, a strongly conservative and anti-DPRK politician, in March 2022 essentially spelled the end to the rapprochement.

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Judge Denies Trump Bid to Toss Evidence in Georgia Election Probe as DA Vows 'We're Ready to Go'

Trump's legal team also made an effort to disqualify Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis, who is leading the investigation into Trump's alleged criminal activities.

A judge in Fulton County, Georgia, on Monday rejected efforts made by former US President Donald Trump's legal team to toss out evidence in an ongoing criminal probe examining alleged interference in the 2020 election results.

"The movants' asserted 'injuries' that would open the doors of the courthouse to their claims are either insufficient or else speculative and unrealized," Fulton County Superior Court Judge Robert McBurney [wrote](#) in the nine-page ruling.

"They are insufficient because, while being the subject (or even target) of a highly publicized criminal investigation is likely an unwelcome and unpleasant experience, no court ever has held that that status alone provides a basis for the courts to interfere with or halt the investigation." In response to Trump's efforts to disqualify Willis from the investigation, McBurney wrote that her efforts have been neither "partisan" nor "personal."

"The drumbeat from the District Attorney has been neither partisan (in the political sense) nor personal, in marked and refreshing contrast to the stream of personal invective flowing from one of the movants," McBurney, who presided over grand jury proceedings with Willis, [wrote](#).

"Put differently, the District Attorney's Office has been doing a fairly routine – and legally unobjectionable – job of public relations in a case that is anything but routine.

McBurney's ruling is the second blow to Trump's efforts in trying to dismiss the probe: earlier this month, the state's Supreme Court rejected another suit made by Trump seeking to block the investigation.

Willis is expected to present her case against Trump to a grand jury by [September 1](#).

It has been reported that Willis is considering bringing racketeering and conspiracy charges against Trump and his allies who attempted to overturn the 2020 election results in Georgia.

The Monday development came days after Willis told local news on Saturday that her legal team had been "working for two-and-a-half years" and that they were "ready to go" on the case.

"The work is accomplished," Willis said. "Some people may not be happy with the decisions that I'm making, and sometimes, when people are unhappy, they act in a way that could create harm."

Local law enforcement officials have been ramping up security in the area in preparation of Willis' charging announcement. The effort has been applauded by Willis, who noted that she had written a letter to the sheriff about security efforts at the courthouse. "I'm not willing to put any of the employees or the constituents that come to the courthouse in harm's way," Willis noted at the time.

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Arizona's Phoenix Marks 31-Day Streak of Temperatures 110°F or Higher

Scientists are predicting that the month of July will be the hottest month ever recorded as well as the warmest month that humans have ever seen, with both the World Meteorological Organization and the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service claiming it to be beyond record-breaking.

The blistering heat wave affecting the globe has taken a sweltering toll on the city of [Phoenix](#), Arizona, as residents of the Valley of the Sun recorded temperatures of 110 degrees Fahrenheit or above for 31 consecutive days.

The record goes beyond their previous record of 18 consecutive days, which was set in June of 1974.

On [Monday](#), however, a respite from the blistering heat failed to come to fruition: monsoon rains from Mexico headed towards the area, but largely failed to bring the relief Phoenixians anticipated. Instead, the day's high was forecast to be near 108°F, with the heat for the city expected to rise past 110°F yet again, later this week.

"Even though it's going to be cooler than it has been, it's still going to be warmer than normal. And the heat definitely can still affect a large portion of the population," said Matthew Hirsch, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Phoenix. "So we're still urging people to take the necessary precautions, such as remaining hydrated and limiting outdoor activity."

While the US Southwest has been suffering under extreme heat for weeks, Phoenix has been made to cancel many of outdoor events as a result. The city has seen at least three days where the high temperatures reached 119°F, while for at least half of the month, overnight lows stayed at above 90°F.

Maricopa County, where Phoenix is located, saw at least 25 heat-related deaths in July, though that number could rise, as another 249 deaths are under investigation for their relationship to the heat.

Hirsch has also warned August could bring higher temperatures than those seen in July.

While El Niño adds heat to a planet already suffering under the effects of human-caused climate change, the city of Phoenix has had a steady growth in population since 1990, with the number of occupants growing from about 2 million to nearly 5 million, as people in the US seek areas with more affordable housing.

According to one [expert](#), population increases have further exacerbated heat conditions in the region as officials continue to expand the human footprint and effectively create a urban heat island.

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Mysterious Object Found on Australian Beach Identified as Space Debris From Indian Rocket

The space debris was described as being the size of a small car after having first washed ashore on an Australian beach in mid-July.

A mysterious cylindrical object that washed ashore mid-July on a beach along the Western Australia state was identified on Monday as being debris from an Indian rocket.

It was confirmed by the Australian Space Agency [said](#) on social media that after an investigation officials "concluded the object located on a beach near Jurien Bay in Western Australia is most likely debris from an expended third-stage of a Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle."

The debris is linked to a launch vehicle is owned and operated by the Indian Space Research Organization, the agency explained.

The object is now in storage, the agency said, adding that they are working with the Indian Space Research Organization in choosing what to do next. Officials added that they would take into consideration the United Nations 1968 agreement that requires space debris to be returned to its original country.

The mystery debris was initially found near Green Head, a coastal town which lies about 155 miles (250 kilometers) north of Perth, Australia.

The large, barnacle-encrusted device is said to be about the size of a small car, measuring about 6.6 feet in height (2 meters) with cables attached to the top.

Not long after the object drew the attention of dozens of residents from the area - some of whom even snapped photos of the mystery find, local police descended on the scene and cordoned off the area.

The object garnered much attention online, with some netizens earlier speculating whether the debris was connected to the disappearance of the Malaysian Airline flight MH370, which was lost over the Indian Ocean in 2014. Some netizens even assumed it was a UFO.

Last August, a similar incident occurred when a [sheep farmer](#) in New South Wales, Australia, found a charred piece of space debris belonging to one of Elon Musk's SpaceX missions in one of his paddocks.

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Musk's New 'X' Sign Removed From HQ After Residents File Multiple Complaints

Signage at the "X" headquarters recently became a hot issue for many residents in the city - including city workers - after the recent company rebrand ran into marketing hurdles over a failure to obtain required permits.

The new "X" sign installed on the roof of the former Twitter headquarters in San Francisco, California, was removed early Monday, just three days after it was initially installed.

The sudden redesign was pulled down after the company reportedly received some two dozen complaints from the area residents who said the bright new signage was flashing at night.

Patrick Hannan, a spokesperson with the Department of Building Inspection, said that an inspector tried to get onto the building's roof following the complaints, but was denied access twice.

One reporter took to Twitter to point out that the sign was "strobing" throughout the night, into the windows of a nearby home.

"I feel like if I was a person who's maybe epileptic or had a sensitivity to bright lights and strobes it would be a major problem to live here, for now it's just an irritant," said one [journalist](#), who took a video of the irritating sign which then went viral.

City officials are now investigating the sign's installation, explaining that erecting a sign on top of a building requires a permit for both design and safety reasons. The building's owners will also be billed for permit fees for both the installation and removal of the sign, as well as to cover the cost of the city's investigation.

The company appeared to botch the safety of removing their original blue bird sign as well when, last Monday, they reportedly failed to secure proper permits and cordon off the sidewalk which is required to ensure pedestrian safety.

Recently, company owner and billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said that the Twitter-turned-X headquarters will stay in San Francisco despite "many" having offered "rich incentives" for the company to move its headquarters out of the city. "San Francisco, beautiful San Francisco, though others forsake you, we will always be your friend," Musk tweeted Saturday.

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US House Committee Investigates Blackrock, MSCI Over China Investments - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - The US House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party has notified Blackrock and MSCI that it is investigating them for facilitating US investment in Chinese companies with alleged military links and human rights violations, The Wall Street Journal reported in Tuesday, citing copies of the letters.

The firms are "exacerbating an already significant national-security threat and undermining American values" by routing "massive flows of American capital" to such companies in China, the letters said.

The committee said that a review found the firms were funding more than 60 Chinese companies flagged by the US government, with BlackRock investing more than \$429 million across five funds in such companies.

It asked each firm to fully account for all Chinese companies they were investing in or including on indexes and to report on the due diligence conducted.

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Crew Dragon Flight to ISS Postponed From August 17 to August 21 – NASA

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - The Crew Dragon mission to the International Space Station has been postponed from August 17 to August 21, NASA said on Tuesday

"NASA and SpaceX now are targeting 5:23 a.m. EDT Monday, Aug. 21, for the launch of the agency's Crew-7 mission to the International Space Station. The adjusted date allows additional time for launch site processing at Launch Complex 39A at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida," NASA said in a statement.

A backup launch opportunity is available at 3:49 a.m. on Friday, August 25, it added.

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US Sanctions 2 Chinese Companies Over Forced Uyghur Labor - Homeland Security

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Homeland Security has sanctioned two Chinese companies over their alleged use of forced Uyghur labor, according to a release published on Tuesday.

"Effective August 2, 2023, goods produced by Camel Group Co., Ltd. and Chenguang Biotech Group Co., Ltd. and its subsidiary Chenguang Biotechnology Group Yanqi Co. Ltd. will be restricted from entering the United States as a result of the companies' participation in business practices that target members of persecuted groups, including Uyghur minorities in the PRC," the release stated.

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Canada Backs ECOWAS Ultimatum for Niger Military to Cede Power - Global Affairs

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - Canada supports the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in its efforts to restore the constitutional order in Niger, Global Affairs said on Tuesday, after the regional bloc gave the Nigerien military one week to cede power or otherwise face the use of force.

On Sunday, ECOWAS gave Niger's coup leaders one week to reinstate the ousted president to power, warning of the use of force otherwise. In addition, ECOWAS suspended all financial aid to Niger, froze the assets of rebels, their families, and supporters, and imposed a ban on commercial flights to and from the country.

"Canada welcomes the leadership and decisions taken by the leaders of the Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS] at their summit on Sunday, July 30, aimed at restoring constitutional order in Niger ... We also support ECOWAS's call for the reinstatement of President Bazoum as head of state within the timeframe prescribed by the regional organization," the ministry said in a statement.

Ottawa also condemned the coup, which it says threatens the stability of Niger and the region.

On July 26, members of the Nigerien presidential guard said in a statement broadcast on national television that they had overthrown President Mohamed Bazoum, closed the borders and imposed a curfew in the country "until further notice." The guard's commander, Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani, proclaimed himself the country's new leader.

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Biden Tied with Trump in US Presidential Rematch - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden currently stands neck-to-neck with former President Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential race, according to a New York Times/Siena College poll.

Despite Trump's criminal indictments and Biden's improved support from Democrats, the poll, conducted July 23-27, found that Biden and Trump were tied at 43% "if the 2024 presidential election were held today."

Of Democratic primary voters, 45% supported Biden's nomination, while 50% said a different person should be nominated. Of the latter group, 39% cited his age as the most important reason for their opposition and 20% cited his job performance. In comparison, a New York Times/Siena College poll conducted a year ago found that 64% of Democratic voters wanted a different presidential nominee than Biden.

Still, support for Biden remains lukewarm. This year, only 20% of Democratic primary voters said they would be "enthusiastic" if Biden was the Democratic presidential nominee and 51% said they would be "satisfied but not enthusiastic."

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US Trucking Giant Yellow Corp. Shuts Down, Files for Bankruptcy - Trade Union

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - Yellow Corp., a trucking giant that was once one of the largest transporters of goods in the United States, is ceasing operations and filing for bankruptcy, The Teamsters Union said, citing legal notice they received from the company.

"The Teamsters Union was served legal notice today that Yellow Corp. is ceasing operations and filing for bankruptcy," the trade union said in a statement on Monday.

The trade union described the news as "unfortunate but not surprising."

"Yellow has historically proven that it could not manage itself despite billions of dollars in worker concessions and hundreds of millions in bailout funding from the federal government. This is a sad day for workers and the American freight industry," Teamsters General President Sean M. O'Brien was quoted in the statement as saying.

The Teamsters said it was putting infrastructure in place to help affected members get the assistance they need to find good union jobs throughout freight and other industries.

The failure of Yellow Corp. is estimated to put nearly 30,000 jobs at risk, dealing a major blow to the US trucking industry.

The Nashville-based company, which had been in operation for nearly 100 years, had about \$1.5 billion in outstanding debt as of March. Of that, \$729.2 million was owed to the federal government, Fox reported.

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Twitter New 'X' Logo Taken Down From San Francisco Headquarters After Complaints - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - The company formerly known as Twitter took the "X" logo down from atop its headquarters building in San Francisco after city officials said the sign was installed without a permit, NPR reported.

The San Francisco Department of Building Inspection received 24 complaints about the sign, including concerns regarding structural safety, the report said on Monday.

According to a city complaint filed on July 28, a company representative declined to provide inspectors access claiming the structure is a "temporary" lighted sign for an event. A second attempt to gain access was made the following day, but access was denied again by the tenant, the document said.

Last Monday, the city said Twitter removed the original sign without proper permits or taping off the sidewalk as part of pedestrian safety measures.

"The property owner will be assessed fees for the unpermitted installation of the illuminated structure," Patrick Hannan, a spokesperson for the San Francisco Department of Building Inspection, told CNBC. "The fees will be for building permits for the installation and removal of the structure, and to cover the cost of the Department of Building Inspection and the Planning Department's investigation."

Last week, owner Elon Musk changed the name and logo of Twitter to "X." In a tweet on Friday, Musk vowed never to leave the city despite its "doom spiral, with one company after another left or leaving."

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White House Says Archer Testimony Debunks Allegations of Biden Business Ties

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - The White House believes that testimony delivered to Congress by former Hunter Biden associate Devon Archer debunks Republicans' claims that US President Joe Biden ever discussed his son's business deals, White House spokesperson Ian Sams said.

"It appears that the House Republicans' own much-hyped witness today testified that he never heard of President Biden discussing business with his son or his son's associates, or doing anything wrong," Sams said as quoted by Fox News on Monday. "In fact, even their own witnesses appear to be debunking their allegations."

Earlier on Monday, Archer provided testimony to lawmakers on Joe Biden's involvement in Hunter Biden's business activity. Archer told lawmakers that Joe Biden joined Hunter Biden and his business associates more than 20 times through speakerphone or in person.

Joe Biden has denied discussing business activities with his son.

US Congressman Dan Goldman told reporters there was no indication that Joe Biden was aware of which parties may have been on the other end of the calls, adding that there is no evidence tying Joe Biden to Hunter Biden's business deals.

However, Republican lawmakers provided a different perspective on Archer's testimony, claiming that it refutes Joe Biden's claims that he never discussed business with Hunter Biden.

Archer's testimony comes amid investigations by lawmakers into potential criminal activity, such as foreign influence peddling, by the Biden family. The House Oversight Committee has been investigating allegations that the Bidens engaged in a multi-million dollar foreign bribery scheme involving executives of Ukrainian energy company Burisma.

The House Oversight Committee in a statement on Archer's testimony said Burisma executives placed "constant pressure" on Hunter Biden to get help from the US government to resolve corruption investigations into the company by then-Prosecutor General of Ukraine Viktor Shokin.

Hunter Biden and two Burisma executives "called [Washington,] DC" to discuss the matter, Archer purportedly testified. Then-Vice President Joe Biden and Hunter Biden also dined with the wife of the former mayor of Moscow, Elena Baturina, in 2014, the statement said. The Biden administration has "notably" not included Baturina in public sanctions, the statement said.

The House Oversight Committee will continue to follow the Bidens' "money trail" and interview witnesses to determine whether the president is compromised or corrupt or if national security is threatened, the statement added.

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US Orders Tech Support for Abrams Tanks Used by Ukraine - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - The US Army has awarded General Dynamics Land Systems (GDLS) an almost \$34 million contract extension to provide technical support for Abrams Main Battle Tanks including those provided to Ukraine, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"General Dynamics Land Systems [of] Sterling Heights, Michigan was awarded a \$33,845,103 modification ...contract for Abrams system technical support," the release said on Monday.

Work on the technical support program will be performed in Sterling Heights in the US state of Michigan over the next 17 months with an estimated completion date of December 31, 2024, the release said.

"Fiscal 2023 operation and maintenance, Army; research, development, test, and evaluation, Army; and Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative funds in the amount of \$33,845,102 were obligated at the time of the award," the Defense Department said.

Work on the support program will be overseen by the US Army Contracting Command based in Detroit Arsenal, Michigan, the release added.

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with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Army Orders More Than \$500Mln Worth of More Air-to-Ground Missiles - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - The US Army has given Lockheed Martin a more than half a billion dollar contract extension to manufacture and deliver more air-to-ground missile systems, the Defense Department announced.

"Lockheed Martin Corporation [of] Orlando, Florida was awarded a \$501,710,581 modification ... contract to manufacture and deliver an Air-to-Ground Missile System," the Defense Department said in a press release on Monday.

"Work on the expanded manufacturing program will be performed in Orlando in the US state of Florida over the next three years with an estimated completion date of September 30, 2026, the release said.

The contract extension will also cover supplies of the air-to-ground missiles to Australia, France, India and the Netherlands, the release added.

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US Awards \$556Mln for Patriot Advance Capability-3 Production - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin has received a more than half a billion dollar US Army contract expansion for Patriot air defense systems advanced capability-3 (PAC-3) production, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin Corporation [of] Grand Prairie, Texas was awarded a \$556,114,935 modification... contract for Phased Array Tracking Radar to Intercept on Target [PATRIOT] Advanced Capability-3 production," the release said on Monday.

The Pentagon said funding for the contract will be pulled from fiscal 2023 missile procurement, Army and Foreign Military Sales related to Bahrain, Kuwait, Poland, Qatar, South Korea, Switzerland, Taiwan, and United Arab Emirates.

Work on the order will be performed at many locations across the United States with an estimated completion date of December 31, 2032, the Defense Department said.

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CDC Warns of Leprosy Endemic in US Southeast - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - US Center For Disease and Control Prevention (CDC) warned about the potential leprosy endemic in southeastern states after registering a new case in central Florida.

"Florida, USA, has witnessed an increased incidence of leprosy cases lacking traditional risk

factors. Those trends, in addition, to decreasing diagnoses in foreign-born persons, contribute to rising evidence that leprosy has become endemic in the southeastern United States,” the CDC said in a statement.

Travel to Florida should be considered when conducting leprosy contact tracing in any state, it added.

The CDC pointed out that the number of cases has more than doubled in the region over the last decade. In 2020, when almost 160 cases were reported in the entire country, Florida was among the top reporting states, it added.

A new case has been registered in a 54-year-old man who denied any foreign or domestic travel or contact with people from leprosy-endemic countries, CDC said.

“Fite stains revealed acid-fast bacilli within histiocytes and cutaneous nerve twigs, a pathognomonic finding of leprosy,” the statement noted.

CDC stressed that leprosy has been “historically uncommon” in the US, adding that the incidence peak happened in 1983. A “drastic reduction” in the number of cases per year occurred between the 1980s and 2000, it added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) -

INTERNATIONAL PEACE TALKS ON UKRAINE

* A Saudi initiative on Ukraine peace talks would be useful if it showed the futility of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's peace plan; Russia is in contact with its partners on relevant proposals, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Monday.

* The United States supports the upcoming Saudi-hosted summit on Ukraine peace and will attend it, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said

* The talks on long-term security guarantees for Ukraine will begin this week virtually at the deputy assistant secretary level, Miller said.

NIGER DEVELOPMENTS

* Russia calls for restoring the rule of law in Niger as soon as possible and is urging the parties to the conflict to show restraint, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday.

* The German government has decided to suspend financial aid to Niger due to the mutiny in the African country, Foreign Ministry spokesman Sebastian Fischer said.

* Niger's acting Prime Minister Hassoumi Massaoudou has signed an authorization allowing France to carry out strikes on the presidential palace under the pretext of freeing President Mohamed Bazoum, who was ousted and detained as a result of a coup, a spokesman for the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland said.

GRAIN EXPORTS AGREEMENT

* The United States welcomes efforts by the United Nations and Turkey to get Russia back in the Black Sea Initiative by conducting behind-the-scenes talks on the issue, US Ambassador to the world body Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Monday.

* Ukraine has reached an agreement with Croatia to use the country's ports on the Danube River and in the Adriatic Sea for transit of Ukrainian grain after the Black Sea Initiative expired, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The Ukrainian military lost more than 220 soldiers during attempts to attack in the Donetsk area over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Monday.

* The Kiev regime is now focusing on conducting terrorist attacks on civilian infrastructure in Russia due to its failed counteroffensive, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

* Ukraine has lost 20,824 soldiers and 2,227 pieces of military equipment during combat operations in July, Shoigu said.

* Russian armed forces are active in all directions in the area of the special military operation in Ukraine, focusing on weakening the combat capabilities of Ukraine, Shoigu said.

* The United States is providing Ukraine an additional \$1.25 billion to support its budgetary needs, including salaries for teachers, emergency responders, and others, US Ambassador in Kiev Bridget Brink said.

TRUMP COURT CASES

* A US court on Monday rejected former President Donald Trump's bid to disqualify a prosecutor in the Georgia election inquiry and his motion to quash the Special Purpose Grand Jury's final report.

* Trump said that he expects an indictment from Special Counsel Jack Smith to come out "any day now" and called it "prosecutorial misconduct."

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Biden Orders Keeping US Space Command Headquarters in Colorado - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden put an end to more than two years of consideration of whether to move the Space Command headquarters and decided to keep it in Colorado, thus canceling former President Donald Trump's decision to move it to the state of Alabama, Defense Department spokesperson Patrick Ryder announced on Monday.

"Today, following a thorough and deliberate evaluation process, and after consultation with Secretary Austin and weighing the input of senior military leaders, President Biden notified the Department of Defense that he has selected Colorado Springs as the permanent location of the US Space Command Headquarters," Ryder said in a statement.

The decision has already sparked criticism from members of Congress representing the state of Alabama. Senator Katie Britt in a statement condemned Biden's move and called it a decision that put politics first and not national security interests.

US congressman and Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee Mike Rogers also called Biden's decision political, adding that the fight is "far from over."

Since 1987, the US Space Command has been headquartered at Peterson Space Force Base in Colorado Springs, but in his final days in January 2021, Trump decided to move the Space Command headquarters from Colorado to Huntsville, Alabama.

During Trump's administration, the US Air Force named Redstone Arsenal as the new headquarters site for the US Space Command, citing the high-tech workforce, schools, and infrastructure in Huntsville, also known as "Rocket City," hosting NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center as well as the Army's Redstone Arsenal.

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US House Oversight Committee Says Testimony Proves Biden Lied About Ties to Son's Business

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Former friend and business associate of Hunter Biden, Devon Archer, confirmed to lawmakers that then-US vice President Joe Biden was involved in his son's foreign business deals via phone calls and dinners, the House Oversight Committee said on Monday.

"Archer's testimony confirms Joe Biden lied to the American people when he said he had no knowledge about his son's business dealings and was not involved," the House Oversight Committee said in a statement.

Then-Vice President Joe Biden joined Hunter Biden's dinners with foreign business associates in person or by speakerphone more than 20 times, the statement said.

Earlier on Monday, Congressman Dan Goldman said that there is no indication Joe Biden was aware of which parties may have been on the other end of the calls and denied any connection between the president and his son's business deals.

Archer's testimony comes amid investigations by lawmakers into potential criminal activity, such as foreign influence peddling, by the Biden family. The House Oversight Committee has been investigating allegations that the Bidens engaged in a multi-million dollar foreign bribery scheme involving executives of Ukrainian energy company Burisma.

The executives placed "constant pressure" on Hunter Biden to get help from the US government to resolve corruption investigations into the company by then-Prosecutor General of Ukraine Viktor Shokin, the statement said.

Hunter Biden and two Burisma executives "called [Washington,] DC" to discuss the matter, according to Archer's testimony.

The call raises concerns that Hunter Biden may have violated the Foreign Agents Registration Act, the statement added.

Moreover, then-Vice President Joe Biden and Hunter Biden dined with the wife of the former mayor of Moscow, Elena Baturina, in 2014, the statement said. The Biden administration has "notably" not included Baturina in public sanctions, the statement said.

Joe Biden has previously denied ever discussing foreign business deals with his son.

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US to Insist Fullest Compliance With NPT, Urges Parties to Condemn Violations - State Dept

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United States will press for the fullest compliance with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and is urging the parties to denounce any occurring violations, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"The United States continues to work in good faith to advance all aspects of the treaty, including the Article VI obligation to pursue good faith negotiations on effective measures relating to nuclear disarmament," Miller said. "We will insist on the fullest compliance with NPT nonproliferation safeguards and call on all NPT Parties to raise standards wherever possible and to condemn violations where they occur."

Miller continued to say that Washington will also work with its partners to expand access to the benefits of peaceful uses, including the application of nuclear technologies for human and animal health, water resource management and food security, among others.

Miller's comments come ahead of the 2023 Preparatory Committee Meeting (PrepCom) in Vienna, where the United States will be represented by Special Representative of the President for Nuclear Nonproliferation Adam Scheinman.

"The challenges we face today serve as a stark reminder of why the NPT is indispensable and remains the cornerstone of the global nuclear nonproliferation regime," Miller said. "Our top priority for the PrepCom – and for this review cycle – must be to preserve and strengthen this critical treaty, not in spite of the challenges we face but because of them."

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Oil Up as Much as 15% for July With OPEC's Biggest Win in 18 Months

NEW YORK, July 31 (Sputnik) - Oil prices rose as much as 15% in July, delivering the biggest gain in 18 months for producers in OPEC, who used the specter of production cuts to unnerve a market that usually sees runaway demand for travel during the summer.

Notwithstanding the market squeeze applied by the 13-member Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and their 10 oil-producing allies, which includes Russia, US energy demand has been relatively underwhelming this month. Crude inventories in the world's top consumer showed a net gain in the first three weeks of July without last week's data.

New York-based West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, crude finished July trading at \$81.80 a barrel, up \$1.22, or 1.5%, on the day. For the month, WTI was up more than \$11, or nearly 16%. In Monday's trade, the US crude benchmark rose to as high as \$81.72, a peak not seen since

April.

London-based Brent crude settled Monday's session at \$85.56, up 57 cents, or 0.7%, on the day. For the month, it gained almost \$11, or 14%, above June's closing price. The global oil benchmark hit a three-month high of \$85.47 during Monday's session.

The gain for July was the highest for both WTI and Brent since January 2022, after a five-week rally that began just ahead of the start of this month.

The NFP, or non-farm payrolls, report refers to US job performance in July, which the Federal Reserve is closely watching to decide how to move forward with inflation.

From a four-decade high of 9% in June 2022, the Fed has managed to bring inflation, measured by the Consumer Price Index, to just 3% per annum in June this year. But the success came with a big price: the raising of interest rates by 525 basis points in just 18 months to smother the runaway inflation caused by the trillions of dollars of pandemic relief spending by the government.

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US Ambassador Confirms Providing Ukraine Additional \$1.25Bln in Budget Assistance

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United States is providing Ukraine an additional \$1.25 billion to support its budget needs, including salaries for teachers, emergency responders, and others, US Ambassador to Ukraine Bridget Brink said on Monday.

"Today's disbursement of \$1.25 billion brings the total to more than \$20 billion and enables Ukraine to continue providing critical services by paying the salaries of teachers, health care workers and emergency responders," Brink said via Twitter.

The Ukrainian Finance Ministry reported earlier in the day that Ukraine received the new grant from the United States to reimburse state budget expenses, including wages for state employees and social benefits.

The grant was provided as part of the fifth additional financing under the World Bank's Public Expenditures for Administrative Capacity Endurance in Ukraine (PEACE in Ukraine) project, which seeks to partially cover state budget expenditures, including for social and humanitarian purposes.

Ukrainian Finance Minister Serhiy Marchenko said in May that the country's budget has been running a deficit of about \$5 billion per month since Russia's special military operation began, with two-thirds of the money coming from foreign loans and grants and three-quarters spent on military needs.

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US House Panels Launching Probe Into 'Unusual' Hunter Biden Plea Agreement - Letter

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The US House committees on Ways and Means, Oversight and Judiciary are requesting information from US Attorney General Merrick Garland on a plea agreement between Hunter Biden and the Justice Department to resolve criminal tax and firearms charges, the panels said on Monday.

"The Department's unusual plea and pretrial diversion agreements with Mr. Biden raise serious concerns - especially when combined with recent whistleblower allegations - that the Department has provided preferential treatment toward Mr. Biden in the course of its investigation and proposed resolution of his alleged criminal conduct," the panels' chairmen said in a letter to Garland.

Last week, a judge with the US District Court for the District of Delaware declined to accept an agreement between Biden and the Justice Department to enter into a plea agreement on tax charges and a pretrial diversion agreement on a firearms charge, characterizing the deal as atypical.

The chairmen - Congressmen Jason Smith, James Comer and Jim Jordan - requested Garland provide information to provide clarity on the Justice Department's decision to sign off on such an agreement.

The lawmakers' letter requested information on any similar agreements made by the US Attorney's Office for the District of Delaware and how the Biden deal was drafted by the prosecution and defense teams.

In addition, the letter requested a "generalized description" of the nature of any ongoing investigations concerning Hunter Biden.

The letter urges Garland to provide the requested information by August 14.

The probe into Hunter Biden's plea deal comes alongside a broader set of investigations by lawmakers into alleged influence peddling and criminal activity by the Biden family, as well as the alleged weaponization of the federal government and justice system to their benefit.

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Hearing for Russian National Klyushin Reset for September 7 - Court Document

(Adds context, background in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The sentencing for Russian national Vladislav Klyushin, who was convicted by a federal jury in February on charges of conspiracy, wire fraud and securities fraud, has been rescheduled for September 7, according to a court document published on Monday.

"Sentencing hearing reset from 7/31/2023 to 9/7/2023 09:30 AM [13:30 GMT] in Courtroom 19 (In person only) before Judge Patti B. Saris. (Entered: 07/31/2023)," the document said.

The sentencing for KLyushin, which was supposed to take place on July 31, has been rescheduled several times.

Last week, the US court canceled the sentencing until further notice. Klyushin's lawyer, Maksim Nemtsev, told Sputnik that US prosecutors requested an additional seven days.

Klyushin was arrested in Switzerland in March 2021 and extradited to the United States later

that year.

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US at Talks With Taliban in Qatar Raises Concerns, Confidence Building Areas - State Dept

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - US officials met with representatives of the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) in Doha to deliver concerns over human rights and the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and also outlined areas for confidence building, the State Department said on Monday.

The meeting took place from July 30-31.

"U.S. officials identified areas for confidence building in support of the Afghan people. The American delegation also expressed deep concern regarding the humanitarian crisis and the need to continue to support aid organizations and UN bodies delivering assistance consistent with humanitarian principles," the State Department said in a statement.

The US delegation was led by Special Representative for Afghanistan Thomas West, Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights Rina Amiri, and Chief of the Doha-based US Mission to Afghanistan Karen Decker.

They urged the Taliban to reverse policies causing deterioration of the human rights situation in Afghanistan, particularly for women, girls, and vulnerable communities, according to the statement. They also expressed "grave concern" regarding detentions, media crackdowns, and limits on religious practice.

The US officials also met with Afghan Central Bank and Finance Ministry representatives to discuss the state of the nation's economy and challenges in the banking sector. They also took note of the Taliban's continuing commitment not to allow the territory of Afghanistan to be used by anyone to threaten the United States and its allies. The US delegation expressed concerns over drug trafficking in Afghanistan as well as openness to continue dialogue on the issue, the statement added.

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Congress Trying to Ban US Funding for Wuhan and Other Russian, Chinese Labs - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - A group of US senators has introduced a bill that would end funding for animal experiments at the Wuhan lab and 27 other labs eligible to receive taxpayer funding for research, Fox News reported on Monday.

The bill, which is called the Accountability in Foreign Animal Research (AFAR) Act of 2023, was put forth by Republican senators Joni Ernst and Lisa McClain and Democratic senator Don Davis. It aims to prevent the use of federal funds for research involving vertebrate animals in nations the government considers to be foreign adversaries, the report said.

"We successfully pulled the plug on U.S. taxpayer funding to China's Wuhan Institute and Russia's labs—for now. The AFAR Act will guarantee not another penny will be spent subsidizing crazy and dangerous experiments, like putting cats on a treadmill or enhancing bat coronaviruses in Russia and China ever again," Ernst is quoted as saying in the report.

The senators argue that this "reckless spending" is against the best interest of taxpayers, said the report. The bill stems from an investigation Ernst started in January that revealed over 40 million US dollars was given to a non-government pandemic research group that provided at least 2 million dollars to the Wuhan lab to conduct coronavirus experiments.

According to the report, which uses numbers provided by Ernst, 1.3 billion US tax dollars have been used to fund projects in testing labs in Russia and China since 2017.

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Democrat Says Hunter Biden Put Joe Biden on Business Calls, Republicans Urge Impeachment

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Hunter Biden placed his father, then-US Vice President Joe Biden, on calls with his business colleagues on numerous occasions, Democratic Congressman Dan Goldman said on Monday.

Earlier on Monday, lawmakers heard from former Hunter Biden friend and business associate Devon Archer, who provided testimony on Joe Biden's involvement in Hunter Biden's foreign business dealings.

Joe Biden has denied discussing business with his son.

"[Archer] indicated that he approximated about 20 times over the course of his 10-year business relationship that he had with Hunter Biden, which would be about twice a year, that Hunter would put his father on speakerphone with whomever was at dinner," Goldman said.

However, there is no indication Joe Biden was aware of which parties may have been on the other end of the call, Goldman said, adding that there were no ties to Hunter Biden's business dealings.

Archer's testimony comes amid investigations by lawmakers into alleged criminal activity by the

Biden family, including a foreign bribery scheme involving Joe Biden, Hunter Biden and executives of Ukrainian energy company Burisma.

US Congressman Andy Biggs called for an impeachment inquiry into Joe Biden following the meeting with Archer, while US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene said earlier in the day that an impeachment inquiry is "imminent."

"Hunter didn't just peddle his family's influence to secure business deals that would otherwise be unattainable, he knew he and his associates would largely be shielded from the scales of justice because of his last name: Biden," Greene said in a statement.

The House probes into potential criminal activity by the Biden family also comes alongside an investigation by lawmakers into potential weaponization of the federal government and its justice system to protect the Bidens and attack their political opponents.

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US Commerce Secretary Raimondo to Visit China in August - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo is planning to visit China next month just as the United States tries to lower tensions between Beijing and Washington, Bloomberg reported on Monday.

The trip is slated to take place the week of August 21, though the date may be subject to change, the report said.

It is unclear at present what topics Raimondo will discuss with her Chinese counterpart, but one possible deliverable from the trip could be forming a working group between her department and China's Commerce Ministry focused on US export controls, the report said.

The visit will be Raimondo's first official trip to China as Commerce Secretary and comes as the Biden administration is in the process of curbing US technology investments in China by mid-August, the report added.

The United States has said it seeks to repair its relationship with China after it soured following numerous incidents concerning Taiwan and an alleged surveillance balloon, in addition to Washington imposing export controls on microchip technology, according to the report.

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UN Has No Information on Moscow Drone Attack, Urges Stopping Attacks on Civilians - Haq

UNITED NATIONS, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United Nations does not have any information as to who is responsible for the latest drone attack on Moscow, but opposes any such attacks on civilian facilities, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Monday.

"We don't have any information on who is responsible for this attack. But certainly, we are against any and all attacks on civilian facilities and we want them to stop," Haq said during a

press briefing.

The United Nations most of the time is unable to confirm or dispute who is behind various attacks in conflicts, Haq added.

On Sunday, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin said that Ukrainian drones attacked the Russian capital overnight, damaging the facades of two office towers in the city's business center. The two office buildings were damaged but there were no casualties.

The Russian Mission to the United Nations said earlier on Monday that the Kiev regime's conduct is starting to resemble the methods of the Islamic State (outlawed in Russia) or Chechen terrorists.

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US, Global Efforts to Plant Billions of Trees Threatened by Lack of Seedlings - Study

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Efforts by the United States and international organizations to plant billions of trees in the coming years are threatened by a lack of seedlings to plant, according to a study published Monday in the journal Bioscience.

"The REPLANT Act provides money for the US Forest Service to plant more than a billion trees in the next nine years. The World Economic Forum aims to help plant a trillion trees around the world by 2030," the University of Vermont said in a report on the study. "But new research shows a troubling bottleneck that could threaten these efforts: US tree nurseries don't grow close to enough trees - nor have the species diversity needed - to meet ambitious plans."

The University of Vermont-led study examined 605 plant nurseries in 20 northern US states, finding that only 56 of the nurseries have adequate stocks of seedlings for reforestation efforts, and only 14 of which were government-operated.

The study also found that forest nurseries tended to keep stocks of tree species used in commercial timber production over those used for ecological restoration.

Nurseries had low stocks of locally adapted and "future-climate-suitable" trees needed to reach conservation goals, according to the study.

"People want trillions of trees - but often, on the ground, it's one old farmer walking around to collect acorns. There's a massive disconnect," University of Vermont post-doctoral scientist Peter Clark is quoted as saying in the report.

Federal and state investments in seedling production and diversity at regional nurseries will be critical to addressing climate change through tree planting, according to the study.

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State Dept. Says Invitation in Place for China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Visit US

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The State Department expects that the invitation for China's former foreign minister Qin Gang to visit the United States will now be extended to his successor, Wang Yi, spokesman Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"I don't know if we have yet officially extended that invitation but it was an invitation to the Foreign Minister," Miller told a press briefing. "Obviously, Wang Yi is now serving in the role of Foreign Minister. So I would expect that the invitation would be extended to him."

Wang, who served as the top Chinese diplomat from 2013-2022, took over from his successor, Qin Gang, who was removed from office last week. Qin had not been seen in public for about a month, prompting media speculation. The Chinese government did not state an official reason for the staff change.

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Majority of US Believes Biden Hid Involvement in Son's Foreign Business Deals - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - A majority of likely voters in the United States believe that US President Joe Biden engaged in an illegal coverup of his involvement in the business dealings of his son, Hunter Biden, according to a Rasmussen Reports poll released Monday.

A majority of respondents, 60%, believe that Biden was very or somewhat likely engaged in an illegal coverup, the poll report said.

Thirty-four percent of respondents said it is not very or not at all likely that Biden hid his involvement in his son's business deals, the poll report added.

The poll comes amid probes by lawmakers into potential criminal activity involving the Biden family, particularly business deals linked to Hunter Biden. Joe Biden has denied discussing foreign business deals with his son.

Lawmakers are also investigating the potential weaponization of the US justice system against Biden's political opponents.

A majority of respondents, 58%, believe that Biden has weaponized the US government to benefit his family and deny Congress the ability to conduct oversight, the poll also found.

The poll surveyed 1,027 likely US voters from July 26-27 and 30, the poll report said. The poll maintains a sampling error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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Talks on Ukraine Security Guarantees to Kick Off This Week Online - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Talks on long-term security guarantees for Ukraine will begin this week virtually at the deputy assistant secretary level, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"Those talks are going to kick off this week," Miller told a press briefing. "The talks about long-term security commitments will be virtual ... It'd be at the deputy assistant secretary level."

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US Aware of Reported Kidnapping of Two Americans in Haiti - State Dept

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United States is aware of the reported kidnapping of two Americans in Haiti, US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller told reporters on Monday.

"We are aware of the reports that two US citizens were kidnapped in Haiti," Miller said in a press briefing. "We are in regular contact with the Haitian authorities, we will continue to work with them and our government and inter-agency partners. But because it's an ongoing law enforcement investigation there is not more detail that i can offer."

On July 29, a faith based organization El Roi Haiti confirmed that Alix Dorsainvil, its Director's wife, and their child were kidnapped on the morning of July 27 from the campus near Port au Prince while serving in the community ministry.

The National Human Rights Defense Network (RNDDH) in an alert earlier this month noted that from May 1 - July 12 at least 40 people were abducted and 75 murdered.

This trend followed a reduction in kidnappings some credited to a vigilante campaign, known as "bwa kale," that cracked down on gangs.

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US Supports Saudi-Hosted Ukraine Peace Summit, Will Participate - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United States supports the upcoming Saudi-hosted summit on Ukraine peace and will attend it, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"We do, of course, support the summit," Miller told a press briefing, when asked about the meeting. "I can confirm that there will be US government officials, not ready to make announcements who these will be."

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US Designates Leaders of Islamic State, Al-Qaeda Cells in Maldives - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United States designated leaders and financial facilitators of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda terrorists groups (both outlawed in Russia) in the

Maldives, the US Treasury said on Monday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated key leaders and financial facilitators of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS) and al-Qa'ida in Maldives, including 20 ISIS, ISIS-Khorasan (IS-K), and al-Qa'ida operatives," the release said.

The US Treasury also designated 29 companies with ties to the recently-designated individuals, who include leaders of Maldives-based terrorist-affiliated criminal gangs and associates of key IS-K recruiter Mohamad Ameen, the release said.

Several of these newly-designated individuals have also planned or carried out attacks that targeted journalists and local authorities, the release added.

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US Sanctions Srpska Officials for Allegedly Undermining Dayton Accords - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United States is designating one Bosnian official and three government officials from the Republika Srpska for allegedly undermining the Dayton Peace Agreement, the US Treasury said on Monday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated one state-level official of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and three government officials from the Republika Srpska (RS), one of two entities comprising BiH, pursuant to Executive Order 14033," the Treasury said in the release.

The officials designated by the US Treasury include Speaker and President of the Republika Srpska National Assembly Nenad Stevandic, Srpska Minister of Justice Milos Bukejlovic, Serb member of the Bosnian Presidency Zeljka Cvijanovic, and Republika Srpska Prime Minister Radovan Viskovic, the release said.

According to the release, these officials obstructed and threatened the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement by encouraging the passage of a Republika Srpska National Assembly law that purports to declare the decisions of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Constitutional Court inapplicable in the Republika Srpska.

The release noted that the institutions and government positions that these four individuals hold are not the target of these latest designations, only the individuals themselves.

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Russian National Konoshchenok Not Receiving Needed Medication in US Custody - Defense

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Russian national Vadim Konoshchenok, whom the United States suspects of transporting US-made items from Estonia to Russia, is not receiving the necessary medicine for high blood pressure while in custody, his lawyer said at a court hearing.

"My client is not getting needed medication," Sabrina Shroff told judge Hector Gonzalez. Konoshchenok needs drugs for high blood pressure.

In addition, her client complains that "the cross was confiscated from him, and he asks to return it," she added.

Konoshchenok was extradited to the United States from Estonia on July 13. In the United States, the Russian citizen is accused of conspiring to circumvent sanctions, illegal purchases for the Russian defense sector, and related financial fraud.

The US Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York told Sputnik that Konoshchenok did not plead guilty to the allegations.

In December, the Russian embassy in Tallinn dismissed claims that Konoshchenok was an FSB officer as "nothing more than a fantasy."

According to the Russian diplomatic mission in Estonia, Konoshchenok, who was born in Tallinn, lives in Estonia with a permanent residence permit and has six children. The embassy called his detention and extradition to the United States another hostage-taking of a Russian citizen.

The next hearing for Konoshchenok is scheduled for October 19.

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US House Oversight Committee Requests Information on Influence of Hunter Biden Art Sales

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - US House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer is requesting information related to the potential influence of transactions involving Hunter Biden's artwork on appointments to roles within the Biden administration, the lawmaker said in a statement.

The panel is investigating the purchase of a piece of Hunter Biden's artwork by Democrat donor Elizabeth Hirsch Naftali, whom US President Joe Biden appointed to the Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, the statement said on Sunday.

"In a letter to Ms. Hirsch Naftali and White House Counsel Stuart Delery, Chairman Comer is requesting information related to Ms. Hirsch Naftali's purchase of Hunter Biden's artwork, her appointment to the Commission, and the White House's involvement in the sale of Hunter Biden's artwork," the statement said.

The probe is part of a broader investigation by the House Oversight Committee into potential foreign and domestic influence peddling schemes by the Biden family, including through the sale of Hunter Biden's artwork, the statement said.

Hunter Biden's art dealer, George Berges, has repeatedly failed to comply with the committee's request for information related to the sale of Biden's art, the statement added.

The letter to Hirsch Naftali requests she provide information on communications with Berges, as well as on any communications with federal employees regarding the purchase of Biden's art or her appointment to the commission.

The letter also requests information on at least 13 trips Hirsch Naftali has made to the White House since December 2021.

The letter to the White House counsel requests information on communications with Hirsch Naftali and Berges, as well as information on Naftali's visits to the White House. Both letters request the parties deliver the information by August 11.

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DeSantis Says Asymmetric US-China Economic Relationship Should End

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Republican presidential hopeful Ron DeSantis said on Monday that the asymmetric relationship between the United States and China, complete with Beijing enjoying a preferential trade status, should end.

"We have to restore the economic sovereignty of this country and take back control of our economy from China," DeSantis said during a campaign stop in New Hampshire. "The abusive relationship, the asymmetric relationship between our two countries must come to an end. No more massive trade deficits, no more importing of goods with stolen intellectual property, no more preferential trade status."

DeSantis said US-China relations have been marred by the theft of US intellectual property, trade dumping, currency manipulation and espionage.

The Florida governor also noted that the United States has developed a dangerous dependence on Chinese supply chains.

US and Chinese officials have held several meetings over the last few months to address a range of issues, especially on issues pertaining to trade. President Joe Biden expects to speak with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping soon, but no date for their talks has been announced yet.

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Trump Says Expects Indictment From Special Counsel Smith to Come Out 'Any Day Now'

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump said on Monday that he expects an indictment from Special Counsel Jack Smith to come out "any day now" and called it "prosecutorial misconduct."

"I assume that an Indictment from Deranged Jack Smith and his highly partisan gang of Thugs, pertaining to my PEACEFULLY & PATRIOTICALLY Speech, will be coming out any day now, as yet another attempt to cover up all of the bad news about bribes, payoffs, and extortion, coming from the Biden 'camp.' This seems to be the way they do it. ELECTION INTERFERENCE! PROSECUTORIAL MISCONDUCT!," Trump said in a Truth Social post.

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with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Charges Businessman, 3 Companies With Illegal Crypto Asset Offerings for \$1Bln - SEC

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United States charged businessman Richard Heart and three of his companies with conducting illegal crypto asset offerings that allowed them to get over \$1 billion from investors, the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said in a statement on Monday.

"The Securities and Exchange Commission today charged Richard Heart (aka Richard Schueler) and three unincorporated entities that he controls, Hex, PulseChain, and PulseX, with conducting unregistered offerings of crypto asset securities that raised more than \$1 billion in crypto assets from investors," the statement said.

The SEC also charged Heart and PulseChain with fraud for misappropriating at least \$12 million of offering proceeds to purchase luxury goods, the statement said.

Heart began marketing Hex as the first high-yield blockchain certificate of deposit in 2018 and promised investors to make them rich, the statement said.

"From at least December 2019 through November 2020, Heart and Hex allegedly offered and sold Hex tokens in an unregistered offering, collecting more than 2.3 million Ethereum (ETH), including through so-called 'recycling' transactions that enabled Heart to surreptitiously gain control of more Hex tokens," the statement said.

The SEC's complaint also alleged that between July 2021 and March 2022, Heart orchestrated two additional unregistered crypto asset security offerings, which allowed him to raise additional hundreds of millions of dollars in crypto assets, the statement said.

"As alleged, those funds were intended to support development of a supposed crypto asset network, PulseChain, and a claimed crypto asset trading platform, PulseX, through the offerings of their native tokens, respectively, PLS and PLSX," the statement added.

Heart also allegedly promised that staking for Hex tokens would deliver up to 38% returns and tried to evade securities laws as he urged people to sacrifice, instead of invest their crypto assets in exchange for PLS and PLSX tokens, according to the statement.

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US House Democrats Encouraged to Highlight Biden's Economic Agenda in Election Bids - Memo

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Democratic candidates running for seats in the US House of Representatives ought to highlight legislation passed by Congress as part of President Joe Biden's economic agenda in order to boost their chances of electoral success, House Majority PAC (HMP) said on Monday.

HMP is a so-called Super PAC (political action committee) focused exclusively on electing members of the Democratic Party to the House of Representatives, according to the organization's website.

“Leading up to Election Day 2024, it is imperative for Democrats to tout their accomplishments on a local and national level. Economic contrast research projects conducted by HMP have shown repeatedly that Democrats dramatically improved their position when they went on offense to talk about the economy,” HMP said in a memo.

Democrats ought to campaign on the Biden administration’s cooperation with Congress to pass bills such as the CHIPS and Science Act, the Inflation Reduction Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the memo said.

Democrats also ought to highlight “record job growth” in the United States, with a focus on manufacturing, clean-energy and union jobs, the memo said.

Moreover, Democratic candidates should attack Republicans on issues such as abortion, defunding the FBI and environmental issues, the memo added.

“Go on offense, and build the contrast with the MAGA House Republicans immediately,” the memo said.

The memo comes more than a year out from the 2024 US national elections, including races to determine the presidency and control over both chambers of Congress. Democrats currently hold the White House and a majority in the Senate, while Republicans hold a majority in the House of Representatives.

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Trump Property Manager Appears in US Court Following Indictment in Docs Probe - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Carlos De Oliveira, the property manager of former President Donald Trump’s Mar-a-Lago residence, appeared in a court in Miami after being charged in a superseding indictment filed as part of the probe into Trump’s alleged mishandling of classified documents, NBC News reported on Monday.

De Oliveira is seeking to secure local legal counsel in Florida prior to arraignment, for which he was asked to return in August, the report said, citing De Oliveira’s attorney John Irving.

The judge overseeing De Oliveira’s case set a \$100,000 bond after reading the four criminal charges against him, the report said.

On Friday, US Special Counsel Jack Smith released a superseding indictment as part of his investigation into Trump’s post-presidency handling of classified documents, charging De Oliveira with crimes including conspiracy to obstruct justice, making false statements and altering, destroying, mutilating or concealing an object.

The indictment alleges that De Oliveira assisted in efforts to delete surveillance footage and then made false statements during a voluntary interview with the FBI.

The indictment also added three additional charges against Trump, bringing the total number of counts to 40.

The criminal probe and charges come amid Trump’s 2024 presidential campaign, leading the former president and his allies to accuse the Biden administration of weaponizing the US justice system.

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Kiev Regime Uses Islamic State Terror Methods to Target Civilians - Russian Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, July 31 (Sputnik) - The Kiev regime utilizes the methods practiced by the Islamic State (outlawed in Russia) or the Chechen terrorists by targeting civilians, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Monday.

"It's a classic terrorist approach similar to ISIL [Islamic State] fighters or Chechen terrorists who would take peaceful civilians as hostages with the silent connivance of Western moralizers. They will remain silent now too," Polyanskiy said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

The Russian diplomat explained that one of the reasons the regime increasingly relies on targeting civilians such as in Crimea is because Crimea is now thriving and Kiev loses sleep over such developments.

The Kiev regime is attacking cities and other civilian areas which are sometimes located thousands of kilometers from the area of military operations, Polyanskiy said.

They also use Islamic State methods of "individual terror," Polyanskiy added.

On Sunday, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin said that Ukrainian drones attacked the Russian capital overnight, damaging the facades of two office towers in the Moscow-City business center.

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No Point For Kiev Regime to Use Drones to Attack Moscow, Other Cities - UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, July 31 (Sputnik) - It will not help the Kiev regime to use drone attacks against Moscow and other Russian cities, the Russian Deputy Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Monday.

"Kiev regime tries to shut them up [Darya Dugong etc.] and to threaten those in Russia who state the truth about what is taking place in Russia or what is the point of using drones to attack Moscow and other cities," Polyanskiy told the Security Council. "That's not even to mention the fact that hundreds of terrorist acts are prevented by our security forces."

Also pointless was the attack on July 22 using the cluster munitions provided by the United States against a civilian automobile with journalists in Zaporozhye region, he added.

Earlier on Sunday, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin said on Telegram that Ukrainian drones attacked the Russian capital overnight, damaging the facades of two office towers in the Moscow-City business center; there were no casualties.

Traffic was blocked along Testovskaya Street in the Moscow-City area, where the two office buildings were damaged, the city transport department said on Sunday morning.

According to the Russian Defense Ministry, Ukraine also attempted to attack Crimea overnight using 25 drones, all of which were destroyed. The ministry specified that there were no

casualties or damage as a result of the attempted terrorist attack.

On Friday morning, the Russian Defense Ministry said that one Ukrainian drone had been shot down overnight while attempting to attack facilities in the Moscow region; there were no casualties or damage.

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Behind-the-Scenes Talks Ongoing to Get Russia Back to Grain Deal - US Envoy to UN

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes efforts by the United Nations and Turkey to get Russia back in the Black Sea grain deal, with behind-the-scenes talks on the issue ongoing, US Permanent Representative to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Monday.

"We are supporting efforts by the Secretary-General, by the government of Turkey, as well as others, to encourage Russia to come back into the deal and resume the movements of grain through the Black Sea," Thomas-Greenfield told reporters.

Discussions on the topic "are ongoing behind the scenes," the diplomat added.

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White House Calls on Congress to Renew Section 702 Surveillance Authorization - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration on Monday called on Congress to renew the authorization of Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) before it expires at the end of the year.

"We agree with the unanimous conclusion reached by this group of independent, deeply experienced experts that failure to reauthorize Section 702 could be 'one of the worst intelligence failures of our time,'" National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Principal Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer said in a release.

Sullivan and Finer referred in the statement to a report by the President's Intelligence Advisory Board (PIAB) about the effectiveness of the legislation.

At the same time, the two officials said that they consider some reforms to be necessary to enhance compliance and oversight.

"We also agree with the Board's recommendation that Section 702 should be reauthorized without new and operationally damaging restrictions on reviewing intelligence lawfully collected by the government and with measures that build on proven reforms to enhance compliance and oversight, among other improvements."

The FBI has come under heavy criticism for misusing the Section 702 communications database on hundreds of thousands of occasions when searching for information on US citizens, including people linked to the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, and

participants in the Black Lives Matter protests.

The vast majority of the PIAB report was publicly released earlier on Monday, the release said.

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Hunter Biden Acquaintance Arrives at US Congress for Testimony on Business Deals - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - A longtime acquaintance and former business associate of Hunter Biden, Devon Archer, arrived at US congressional offices to provide testimony to lawmakers on the Biden family's involvement in foreign business deals under investigation for potential criminal activity, according to images shared Monday by congressional reporters.

Archer will provide closed-door testimony to the House Oversight Committee, which is investigating alleged crimes committed by Hunter Biden and his father, US President Joe Biden. "Devon Archer is coming in. The Department of Justice harassment and obstruction can't stop the truth about Joe Biden from being told," US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene said in a statement. "Impeachment Inquiry is imminent."

Archer is expected to testify to the alleged involvement of Joe Biden in Hunter Biden's foreign business deals, which the president has denied.

The House Oversight Committee is investigating an alleged foreign bribery scheme involving then-Vice President Joe Biden, Hunter Biden and executives from the Ukrainian energy company Burisma.

The allegations are based on information from a confidential FBI source touted as highly trusted.

On Sunday, US media reported that the Justice Department was pushing for Archer's arrest ahead of his testimony to lawmakers, citing a letter filed by prosecutors on Saturday, which requested a judge determine a date for Archer to begin serving prison time for an unrelated criminal case.

However, Archer rejects speculation that the letter is connected to his plans to testify to lawmakers, his attorney Matthew Schwartz said on Sunday in a statement.

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US Advocates Nuclear Arms Transparency Abroad, But Limits It at Home - FAS

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to promote nuclear arms transparency worldwide but the Biden administration is not ready to do so at home as it keeps the size of the US nuclear arsenal secret, the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) said on Monday.

"While US diplomats were busy advocating nuclear transparency abroad, the Department of Defense and Department of Energy rejected two requests from the Federation of American

Scientists to declassify nuclear weapons stockpile and dismantlement numbers," FAS said in a press release.

The contradiction becomes more obvious given that the Biden administration is planning to advocate nuclear transparency and criticize some other states for not being transparent about their nuclear arsenal during the first session of the preparatory committee for the 2026 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which will take place in Geneva this week.

In 2022, the Biden administration decided to stop publishing data on the US nuclear arsenal, which directly contradicts statements by US officials who shared with participants of the NPT Review Conference in August 2022 only a percentage reduction of the arsenal since 1967 instead of announcing the actual stockpile size as of September 2021, the release said.

"The Department of Defense and Department of Energy/National Nuclear Security Administration do not believe that it is in the best interest of the United States to declassify the size of the US nuclear stockpile, the number of weapons dismantled, or the number of weapons awaiting dismantlement as of the end of FY [fiscal year] 2021 at this time," the Office of Classification of the US Energy Department said in a response to FAS.

FAS estimates that the US stockpile at present includes about 3,700 nuclear warheads.

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Court Rejects Trump Bid to Disqualify Prosecutor in Georgia Election Inquiry - Order

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - A US court on Monday rejected former President Donald Trump's bid to disqualify a prosecutor in the Georgia election inquiry and his motion to quash the Special Purpose Grand Jury's final report.

"Former President Trump and alternate elector Latham's motions to preclude any state prosecuting agency from using evidence derived from the Special Purpose Grand Jury's work are DISMISSED for lack of standing. Their motions to quash (or expunge) the Final Report of the Special Purpose Grand Jury are DENIED as moot," the court said in an order.

The motions to disqualify the District Attorney are also denied, the order said.

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Trump Has Three-Fold Advantage Over DeSantis in Republican Presidential Race - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump enjoys three times as much support as his main competitor, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, in the Republican presidential race, according to a poll by The New York Times and Siena College released on Monday.

Fifty-four percent of Republicans said they would vote for Trump, and 17% said they would

back DeSantis. They are followed by former Vice President Mike Pence, former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley and Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina, each scoring 3% support.

Almost 60% of Republicans over 65 years old and between 18 and 29 are ready to support Trump, while DeSantis has 9% and 15% support in those age groups, respectively.

The age group where the Florida governor has the biggest backing (28%) is those aged 30-44. Trump has 41% support among the age group.

While Florida has a large Latin American community, only 13% of Hispanic Americans are ready to support DeSantis, versus 68% of those who would vote for Trump.

Only 37% of white people with a college degree express their support for Trump, and a quarter of them would back DeSantis.

The poll among 932 potential Republican voters was conducted from July 23-27.